

# Suicide prevention: When it is the fire officer who needs help

Isolation and the hierarchy of power can leave officers vulnerable

By Linda Willing

Firefighter suicide is a subject on a lot of people's minds these days. Last year I wrote a [column](#) about this topic for FireRescue1, and it generated more feedback than any other column I have written in over three years.

People wrote to tell me about efforts in their own organizations to address the issue of suicide. They told personal stories of loss.

And one person said this: "Good article. But what about addressing the needs of those in positions of leadership who are at risk?" The writer referred to a recent event when a fire chief in Nebraska lost his life to suicide.

This is an excellent point. Suicide in the fire service is certainly not only a problem for line firefighters. My original column focused on what company officers can do to help prevent suicide among their crews, but a fire department's commitment to preventing suicide among its members must start from the top down. It must also include attention to people in all ranks and positions.

As people move up in rank within the fire department, they may experience losing a sense of connection with others. Company officers and their crews can form strong bonds, and officers are in a position to notice changes in behavior among regular crew members.

They can offer peer support and referral to services such as Employee Assistance Programs for those in need. Most importantly, company officers can create an environment among the crew of acceptance and belonging that goes a long way toward minimizing the feelings of isolation that often accompany suicidal tendencies.

But what if the company officer is the one needing help? What about a battalion chief or a chief of department who may be in trouble and needing help? Who is there for them?

## **Lonely at the top**

Battalion chiefs in particular often comment that they were not prepared for how much of a change it would be to go from being a station officer to someone in charge of a battalion. Battalion chiefs may feel that they have no home base and no real crew.

They are more isolated because of their position and may lack a support network even among those who were there for them when they were company officers.

Likewise, higher-level chiefs, administrative personnel, and the chief of the department may have limited resources when it comes to peer networks.

In smaller departments, many who work in these positions work alone a good part of the time. They may not have anyone around who might notice changes in behavior or mood that could be warning signs for deeper troubles.

Social and professional isolation can be risk factors for suicide. It is not that people who work alone are more prone to suicide, but more that critical changes or warning signs are less likely to be noticed when someone does not have a regular work group or social network.

It may also be harder for those in positions of power to ask for help, especially in a hierarchical organization like the fire service. Firefighters at all levels may have an aversion to asking for help — giving help but not needing it is a cultural norm in many fire departments.

For this reason, it is critical that openness to support systems is demonstrated from the top down. The department chief should be the number-one advocate for the Employee Assistance Program and other support mechanisms.

Everyone in a leadership position should be knowledgeable about what services are available and how they are accessed. This knowledge must come through focused training and regular discussions of how support services work for department members.

Everyone on the department needs to have access to a support network. In New York City, a peer support team of retirees regularly visits fire stations to talk about behavioral health topics. These volunteers provide information about

departmental services related to mental health issues. This team has existed since the 1980s, but has gained traction since 9/11.

Having a respected retiree — whether a firefighter or a chief — talk about the value of support services, and even talk about personal experiences using these services, has had a tremendous impact on removing the stigma from admitting difficulty in one's personal life.

Even in small departments, peer support is possible. Such support does not necessarily have to be framed in the context of behavioral health, but can take the form of professional groups, such as a battalion chiefs' breakfast club.

The important aspect of any program is for people to realize that they are not alone, and that there is help available if they need it.

Suicide is ultimately a mystery, although some risk factors are known. Diminishing a sense of isolation at all levels of the organization is an important first step toward addressing this tragic outcome.

#### **About the author**

Linda F. Willing worked for more than 20 years in the emergency services, including 18 as a career firefighter and fire officer. For the past 10 years, she has provided support for fire and emergency services and other organizations through her company, [RealWorld Training and Consulting](#). Linda's work focuses on developing customized solutions in the areas of leadership development, conflict resolution, diversity management, team building, communications and decision making. Linda is also an adjunct instructor and curriculum advisor for the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program. She has a B.A. in American Studies from the University of Pennsylvania, an M.S. from Regis University in Denver in Organization Development, and is a certified mediator. To contact Linda, e-mail [Linda.Willing@FireRescue1.com](mailto:Linda.Willing@FireRescue1.com).

